

Juveniles Get Direct Access in Indiana

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J. David Donahue,
Commissioner

By Sarah Etter, News Reporter

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As Indiana Commissioner J. David Donahue drove across the state, he pondered a critical situation in juvenile detention centers: How to help youngsters speak out, without getting caught by other inmates.

"Two weeks ago, I was brainstorming to find ways that kids in our juvenile system could talk about their concerns," says Donahue. "I wanted to help them communicate with us - and I thought of a hotline."

Last week, Donahue and the Indiana Department of Correction (DOC) established the state's first direct access hotline. Created for juveniles who were concerned for their safety among peers, or staff, the hotline offers direct access to the Internal Affairs Department and state investigators, anytime of day.

A Stealthy Way to Communicate

When developing the hotline, officials had a major concern: safety.

"We were certainly concerned about drawing attention to the kids," says Donahue. "We don't want to put these youths in a position where another juvenile knows they are speaking to an investigator because they would be put in danger - so we used our existing telephone system and combined it with a three-digit code."

Now, juveniles use the same telephones they typically pick up to speak with parents and loved ones. By creating a network within their existing phone system, the Indiana DOC hopes to ensure that youths will not be targeted for speaking to investigators.

“I wanted to ensure that our youths had unimpeded access to this system,” says Donahue. “Typically, youths do not reach out to staff, usually because of peer pressure. Some juveniles certainly walk around saying ‘Hey, don’t talk to staff’. If a child is being bullied, they will not be quick to communicate. We wanted to eliminate that.”

With the issue of safety addressed, officials also had to ensure that someone would always be available to handle the calls received on the hotline. Although staff is always available during the day, the DOC had to address the issue of evening phone calls. By giving each staff member of the Internal Affairs Department a handheld device, much like a beeper, juveniles will always have someone there to hear them when they speak out.

“No matter where our staff members are, they will get the call,” says Donahue.

The hotline is also available for youths who feel troubled or suicidal.

“This hotline isn’t just about environmental concerns related to other offenders or staff behavior,” says Donahue. “It’s also about personal well-being.”

Now, if a juvenile is feeling suicidal or threatened by another offender, they have the option to make contact with officials - and the Indiana DOC created the hotline without compromising security for youths.

Creating a New Culture in Juvenile Justice

Donahue hopes the hotline will also ensure the positive behavior of staff members. Citing that the DOC had some recent problems with staff members behaving abusively, Donahue says that this hotline will give juveniles the ability to report any instances that might compromise security or employee ethics.

“There are certainly some concerns about prank calls,” says Donahue. “That will most likely happen. But we’re still going to get the information we need from these kids to keep our juvenile centers running correctly, and ensure the safety of our kids. We want to know whatever information is out there, and respond immediately with an investigation to address whatever situation arises.”

Juveniles throughout the Indiana DOC have been informed about the hotline, as well as their parents and guardians. Now, young offenders who enter the DOC are also receiving instructions on how to use the hotline - and how to use it correctly.

“At this point, these kids can immediately communicate their safety concerns,” says Donahue. “That is crucial for everyone here. We know that our staff is doing a tremendous job, but anyone that isn’t will be addressed much more quickly now.”

The new hotline is also cost effective. Since it was created for a telephone system that already existed, the technical division of the DOC simply retooled some hardware and software modifications to re-route hotline calls to the Internal Affairs Department. Within 72 hours of coming up with the idea, Donahue had his hotline - and juveniles had the chance to report their concerns without compromising safety.

“This is about the well-being of our juveniles, and allowing them to communicate in a forthright, honest fashion. I am optimistic and open to hear what these kids have to say. We will have a chance to learn more about our juveniles with this system.”

About The Department of Correction

The Department employs over 8,000 employees and houses 24,000 adult and juveniles in 32 facilities, ranging from minimum to maximum custody, prison camps, juvenile facilities and work release centers. The Department’s home page on the Internet can be found at: <http://www.in.gov/indcorrection>. The Department’s Re-entry Site can be found: <http://www.reentry.in.gov>.